

VZCZCXRO0123  
PP RUEHDT RUEHPT  
DE RUEHBY #0255 0750653  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 160653Z MAR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1204  
INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0268  
RUEHJA/AMEMBASSY JAKARTA PRIORITY 5403  
RUEHDT/AMEMBASSY DILI PRIORITY 0194  
RUEHBN/AMCONSUL MELBOURNE PRIORITY 6139  
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH PRIORITY 4402  
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY PRIORITY 4353  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1997

UNCLAS CANBERRA 000255

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR PRM AND SA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [SMIG](#) [PREF](#) [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [AS](#)  
SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN IMMIGRATION SLASHED 14%

1.(U) Summary: The Labor Government has cut back the cap on permanent visas for skilled workers for 2009-2010 by 14% from 133,500 in 2008-2009 to 115,000. This is the first time that skilled immigrations numbers have been reduced in a decade. This move comes as pressure mounts on the Government due to last week's jump in unemployment to 5.2 per cent. Meanwhile, another boatload of Afghan asylum seekers was intercepted in northern Australian waters, and will be transported to Christmas Island to join more than 180 recent arrivals who are now detained there. End summary

2.(U) According to local press reports, the immigration intake will be cut for the first time in more than a decade as the Government of Australia announced March 16 a 14 percent cut to the skilled migration program, capping the number of workers to enter Australia next year at 115,000, down from 133,500 in 2008-09, to preserve Australian jobs in a deteriorating global economy.

3.(U) The cuts are coupled with deletions of job categories from the critical skills list, which specifies which jobs are open to migrants, according to media reports. Trades in building and manufacturing will be removed, forcing companies to find bricklayers, plumbers, welders and carpenters domestically. Professions still experiencing skills shortages will be immune, such as nurses, doctors, engineers and information technology workers. Senator Evans, Minister for Immigration, says Australia needs a more targeted list "so that migrant workers are meeting skills shortages and not competing with locals for jobs."

4.(U) The decision is likely to please unions but upset businesses, which have warned against "short-sighted" migration cuts.

5.(U) Meanwhile on the illegal immigration front, a boat carrying 54 people from Afghanistan was caught off the north-east coast of Darwin after illegally entering Australian waters. The Australian navy intercepted the vessel on Saturday night after a customs plane flew over on a tip off from a Northern Territory park ranger. The group will be taken to Christmas Island where 137 others await health, security and identity checks. Since September 29, 180 people have arrived in Australian waters.

6.(U) The Minister for Home Affairs, Bob Debus, said the handling of the latest arrival demonstrated Australia's ability to respond to "maritime threats." But, the Opposition immigration spokeswoman, Sharman Stone, said it showed people smugglers were attracting "satisfied clients" and Australia was playing into these people's hands, according to press reports.

7.(SBU) Comment: The permanent immigration figures published for 2007-2008 suggest that actual intake of immigrants did not reach caps. Fewer than 110,000 permanent skilled immigrants were in the program that year. The 133,500 cap for 2008-2009 and 115,000 cap for 2009-2010 might be more than the expected intake itself. Thus the 14% reduction has more political than demographic significance. Certainly the elimination of the construction category of skilled labor is the most important development. Additionally, the Pacific Guest Worker scheme, which is bringing in some 2,500 seasonal agricultural workers, may soon become the focus of immigration opponents.

CLUNE